

**“Be Assertive . . . Be, Be Assertive! You, Your Community, and the  
Free Market Place of Ideas”**

**Kimberlee A. Sharp, Ed.D.**  
Morehead State University  
Department of Curriculum & Instruction

Paper presented at the  
Emerging Leaders Symposium  
Morehead State University

February 20, 2009

## **Abstract**

How aware of societal issues are our young people who will soon be entering the workforce and communities as life-long residents? To what extent do young adults view local and state issues, in particular, as potential barriers to social progress and reform? In what way/s can young adults become and stay abreast of critical issues and initiate discussion with stakeholders and policy makers? This paper will address these questions by drawing upon recent research and trends regarding young adults' exposure to social issues and the news, and will challenge them to take responsibility for the communities they will inherit.

Each of you have been invited to attend Morehead State University's Annual Emerging Leaders Symposium today based on actions observed by our campus community, specifically, your professors. Take a few moments to think about those attributes that gave cause to your nomination. Do you believe that your nomination was arbitrary? Or, do you believe that your nomination was deliberate and therefore an affirmation of your character? If the latter is true, then you must also believe that someone on this campus holds you to some degree of esteem. Regardless of whether you believe your participation is arbitrary or intentional, one thing is true about your presence today; that your instructors believe you possess an implicit, intangible virtue: POTENTIAL. This session will explore the concept of potential in terms of its relationship to leadership, civic duty, and the exchange and deliberation of ideas for the purpose improving our communities.

The Dalai Lama once said, "With realization of one's own potential and self-confidence in one's ability, one can build a better world." Potential for what: potential to become a team-player, a change-agent; an individual whose mind is set on inquiry and innovation during an age in which our nation's economy is in turmoil and our Eastern Kentucky communities are infected with under-performing schools, escalated drop-out rates, and pervasive unemployment and disability rates. Given this grim picture of contemporary America, it sounds like "potential" has little to do with the idealism and mission of the Leaders Symposium. Quite the contrary, part of the purpose of today is to equip you with the inspiration and confidence needed for stimulating change in your workplace and community, and turmoil is what both environments are currently experiencing. If your generation does not take action, entire groups of people, particularly in regions already exposed to great economic adversity, will be relegated to

perpetual poverty, ignorance, and disenfranchisement. The onus is on you, and you will be the ones obligated to promote an improved cultural and economic landscape.

Hopefully this charge does not startle nor discourage you, as my intentions are for it to serve as fodder for solutions. But how can we identify solutions to the complex problems facing our communities unless we are fully informed of the issues confronting them? To illustrate the seriousness of this matter, as part of my teaching load, I teach elementary social studies methods to pre-service teachers. Every semester I assign an investigation, called, "My Hometown," utilizing U.S. Census data as the students' resource. Without fail, I am dumbfounded every semester by my students' reactions because of their amazement and unawareness of the statistical data which describe their communities. Not that I would expect them to be able to recite U.S. Census data about their communities; but the students' naiveté nonetheless reminds me of an adage expressed by Benjamin Franklin, "One half of the world does not know how the other half lives" (Melton, 2004). Certainly, you would think that as members of the community these students would automatically be cognizant of the realities choking their hometowns. Once armed with the demographic data and other contextual factors, these students should be compelled into reaction. What kind of reaction? A reaction to ignore the data? To ignore the data would be the same as being responsible, or at minimum, contributing to the cycle of decay. Or, should their reaction be to activism for the purpose of reversing the pervasive problems confronting their communities? To activate attention would be analogous to "building a better world."

Thus, the potential which led you here today to the Leaders Symposium is illustrative of the charge that I believe is granted upon you, especially in light of your impending graduation. This charge, of participatory citizenship for the purpose of identifying and resolving societal

issues, is one that many of you only received token instruction during high school. According to the National Council for the Social Studies, NCSS, 44% of our nation's public schools reduced instructional time for the social studies in 2007 (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2009). This may help to explain the dismal 2006 report produced by the National Center for Education Statistics. According to the Civics component of the 2006 "Nation's Report Card" sponsored by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, in which students across the United States in grades 4, 8, and 12 are assessed on citizenship knowledge, 66% of twelfth graders scored at the basic level, which, translated, means only "partial mastery" of civics knowledge and skills (U.S. Department of Education [NCES], 2006). The fact that only 1/3 of our nation's high school students graduate with proficient or higher citizen knowledge and skills is startling. And this picture does not improve when describing college students' civics knowledge and awareness of current events. According to an October 2004 Chronicle of Higher Education article, only 21% of college students read a daily newspaper, and only 11% of 18 to 24 year olds utilize the Internet for accessing current events (Mindich, 2004). A myriad of implications to these trends exist, to include decreased civil discourse about societal issues; 2) increased government action without citizen oversight; 3) and increased citizen apathy toward voting and community service (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003).

What, then, does all of this mean for you? My hope is that it means a call to duty to serve your communities in ways that will move them forward, not push them backward; that your service does not surrender to fixed ways of doing and seeing things. My hope is that you make the most of your college education to help you think outside of the box for solutions, rather than to close your eyes to societal dilemmas. My hope is that you enter your community's gates and debate and deliberate all points of view and defend reason above knee – jerk reactions. Most

importantly, my hope is that you appreciate the traditions of the free marketplace of ideas by being consumers of information and practitioners of ideological and cultural exchange.

So, my charge is great and the burden on your shoulders weighty. Neither the call to service nor the call to leadership is easy, but you have shown the potential to achieve both as evidenced by your presence here today. For you to recognize their importance is only the first step; to educate yourself on the complexities of the issues and to reflect upon their possible solutions is the next. Perhaps Benjamin Franklin said it best by declaring, "Nor is duty beneficial because it is commanded, but it is commanded because it is beneficial" (Melton, 2004).

## References

Kahne, J., & Westheimer, J. (2003). Teaching democracy: what schools need to do. [Electronic version]. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85(1), 34 – 40, 57 – 66.

Melton, B.F. (Ed.). (2004). *The Quotable Founding Fathers: A Treasury of 2,500 Wise and Witty Quotations from the Men and Women Who Created America*. Dulles: VA. New England Publishing Associates, Inc.

Mindich, D. (2004, October 8). Dude, where's your newspaper? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. B5.

National Council for the Social Studies. (2009, January 21). NCSS Voices Social Studies Agenda in Welcome Letter to 111<sup>th</sup> Congress. Retrieved February 6, 2009, from <http://www.socialstudies.org/legislative-updates/ncss-voices-social-studies-agenda-welcome-letter-111th-congress> .

U.S. Department of Education, National Center of Education Statistics. (2007). *The Nation's Report Card, Civics 2006: National Assessment of Educational Progress at Grades 4, 8, and 12*. Retrieved February 5, 2009, from [http://nationsreportcard.gov/civics\\_2006/](http://nationsreportcard.gov/civics_2006/) .